



HERCULE  
POIROT

*Agatha  
Christie*

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THE  
SUBMARINE  
PLANS

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A SHORT STORY



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# The Submarine Plans

A Short Story

*Agatha Christie*



**WITNESS**  
**IMPULSE**

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*The Submarine Plans*

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## THE SUBMARINE PLANS

### I

A note had been brought by special messenger. Poirot read it, and a gleam of excitement and interest came into his eyes as he did so. He dismissed the man with a few curt words and then turned to me.

‘Pack a bag with all haste, my friend. We’re going down to Sharples.’

I started at the mention of the famous country place of Lord Alloway. Head of the newly formed Ministry of Defence, Lord Alloway was a prominent member of the Cabinet. As Sir Ralph Curtis, head of a great engineering firm, he had made his mark in the House of Commons, and he was now freely spoken of as *the* coming man, and the one most likely to be asked to form a ministry should the rumours as to Mr David MacAdam’s health prove well founded.

A big Rolls-Royce car was waiting for us below, and as we glided off into the darkness, I plied Poirot with questions.

‘What on earth can they want us for at this time of night?’ I demanded. It was past eleven.

Poirot shook his head. ‘Something of the most urgent, without doubt.’

‘I remember,’ I said, ‘that some years ago there was some rather ugly scandal about Ralph Curtis, as he then was—some jugglery with shares, I believe. In the end, he was completely exonerated; but perhaps something of the kind has arisen again?’

‘It would hardly be necessary for him to send for me in the middle of the night, my friend.’

I was forced to agree, and the remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Once out of London, the powerful car forged rapidly ahead, and we arrived at Sharples in a little under the hour.

A pontifical butler conducted us at once to a small study where Lord Alloway was awaiting us. He sprang up to greet us—a tall, spare man who seemed actually to radiate power and vitality.

‘M. Poirot, I am delighted to see you. It is the second time the government has demanded your services. I remember only too well what you did for us during the war, when the Prime Minister was kidnapped in that astounding fashion. Your masterly deductions—and may I add, your discretion?—saved the situation.’

Poirot’s eyes twinkled a little.

‘Do I gather then, milor’, that this is another case for—discretion?’

‘Most emphatically. Sir Harry and I—oh, let me introduce you—Admiral Sir Harry Weardale, our First Sea Lord—M. Poirot and—let me see, Captain—’

‘Hastings,’ I supplied.

‘I’ve often heard of you, M. Poirot,’ said Sir Harry, shaking hands. ‘This is a most unaccountable business, and if you can solve it, we’ll be extremely grateful to you.’

I liked the First Sea Lord immediately, a square, bluff sailor of the good old-fashioned type.

Poirot looked inquiringly at them both, and Alloway took up the tale.

‘Of course, you understand that all this is in confidence, M. Poirot. We have had a most serious loss. The plans of the new Z type of submarine have been stolen.’

‘When was that?’

‘Tonight—less than three hours ago. You can appreciate perhaps, M. Poirot, the magnitude of the disaster. It is essential that the loss should not be made public. I will give you the facts as briefly as possible. My guests over the week-end were the Admiral, here, his wife and son, and Mrs Conrad, a lady well known in London society. The ladies retired to bed early—about ten o’clock; so did Mr Leonard Weardale. Sir Harry is down here partly for the purpose of discussing the construction of this new type of submarine with me. Accordingly, I asked Mr Fitzroy, my secretary, to get out the plans from the safe in the corner there, and to arrange them ready for me, as well as various other documents that bore upon the subject in hand. While he was doing this, the Admiral and I strolled up and down the terrace, smoking cigars and enjoying the warm June air. We finished our smoke and our chat, and decided to get down to business. Just as we turned at the far end of the terrace, I fancied I saw a shadow slip out of the french window here, cross the terrace, and disappear. I paid very little attention,

however. I knew Fitzroy to be in this room, and it never entered my head that anything might be amiss. There, of course, I am to blame. Well, we retraced our steps along the terrace and entered this room by the window just as Fitzroy entered it from the hall.

‘ “Got everything out we are likely to need, Fitzroy?” I asked.

‘ “I think so, Lord Alloway. The papers are all on your desk,” he answered. And then he wished us both good night.

‘ “Just wait a minute,” I said, going to the desk. “I may want something I haven’t mentioned.”

‘I looked quickly through the papers that were lying there.

‘ “You’ve forgotten the most important of the lot, Fitzroy,” I said. “The actual plans of the submarine!”

‘ “The plans are right on top, Lord Alloway.”

‘ “Oh no, they’re not,” I said, turning over the papers.

‘ “But I put them there not a minute ago!”

‘ “Well, they’re not here now,” I said.

‘Fitzroy advanced with a bewildered expression on his face. The thing seemed incredible. We turned over the papers on the desk; we hunted through the safe; but at last we had to make up our minds to it that the papers were gone—and gone within the short space of about three minutes while Fitzroy was absent from the room.’

‘Why did he leave the room?’ asked Poirot quickly.

‘Just what I asked him,’ exclaimed Sir Harry.

‘It appears,’ said Lord Alloway, ‘that just when he had finished arranging the papers on my desk, he was startled by hearing a woman scream. He dashed out into the hall. On the stairs he discovered Mrs Conrad’s French maid. The girl looked very white and upset, and declared that she had seen a ghost—a tall figure dressed all in white that moved without a sound. Fitzroy laughed at her fears and told her, in more or less polite language, not to be a fool. Then he returned to this room just as we entered from the window.’

‘It all seems very clear,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘The only question is, was the maid an accomplice? Did she scream by arrangement with her confederate lurking outside, or was he merely waiting there in the hope of an opportunity presenting itself? It was a man, I suppose—not a woman you saw?’

‘I can’t tell you, M. Poirot. It was just a—shadow.’

The admiral gave such a peculiar snort that it could not fail to attract attention.

‘M. l’Amiral has something to say, I think,’ said Poirot quietly, with a slight smile. ‘You saw this shadow, Sir Harry?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ returned the other. ‘And neither did Alloway. The branch of a tree flapped, or something, and then afterwards, when we discovered the theft, he leaped to the conclusion that he had seen someone pass across the terrace. His imagination played a trick on him; that’s all.’

‘I am not usually credited with having much imagination,’ said Lord Alloway with a slight smile.

‘Nonsense, we’ve all got imagination. We can all work ourselves up to believe that we’ve seen more than we have. I’ve had a lifetime of experience at sea, and I’ll back my eyes against those of any landsman. I was looking right down the terrace, and I’d have seen the same if there was anything to see.’

He was quite excited over the matter. Poirot rose and stepped quickly to the window.

‘You permit?’ he asked. ‘We must settle this point if possible.’

He went out upon the terrace, and we followed him. He had taken an electric torch from his pocket, and was playing the light along the edge of the grass that bordered the terrace.

‘Where did he cross the terrace, milor’?’ he asked.

‘About opposite the window, I should say.’

Poirot continued to play the torch for some minutes longer, walking the entire length of the terrace and back. Then he shut it off and straightened himself up.

‘Sir Harry is right—and you are wrong, milor’, he said quietly. ‘It rained heavily earlier this evening. Anyone who passed over that grass could not avoid leaving footmarks. But there are none—none at all.’

His eyes went from one man’s face to the other’s. Lord Alloway looked bewildered and unconvinced; the Admiral expressed a noisy gratification.

‘Knew I couldn’t be wrong,’ he declared. ‘Trust my eyes anywhere.’

He was such a picture of an honest old sea-dog that I could not help smiling.



‘So that brings us to the people in the house,’ said Poirot smoothly. ‘Let us come inside again. Now, milor’, while Mr Fitzroy was speaking to the maid on the stairs, could anyone have seized the opportunity to enter the study from the hall?’

Lord Alloway shook his head.

‘Quite impossible—they would have had to pass him in order to do so.’

‘And Mr Fitzroy himself—you are sure of him, eh?’

Lord Alloway flushed.

‘Absolutely, M. Poirot. I will answer confidently for my secretary. It is quite impossible that he should be concerned in the matter in any way.’

‘Everything seems to be impossible,’ remarked Poirot rather drily. ‘Possibly the plans attached to themselves a little pair of wings, and flew away—*comme ça!*’ He blew his lips out like a comical cherub.

‘The whole thing is impossible,’ declared Lord Alloway impatiently. ‘But I beg, M. Poirot, that you will not dream of suspecting Fitzroy. Consider for one moment—had he wished to take the plans, what could have been easier for him than to take a tracing of them without going to the trouble of stealing them?’

‘There, milor’, said Poirot with approval, ‘you make a remark *bien juste*—I see that you have a mind orderly and methodical. *L’Angleterre* is happy in possessing you.’

Lord Alloway looked rather embarrassed by this sudden burst of praise. Poirot returned to the matter in hand.

‘The room in which you had been sitting all the evening—’

‘The drawing-room? Yes?’

‘That also has a window on the terrace, since I remember your saying you went out that way. Would it not be possible for someone to come out by the drawing-room window and in by this one while Mr Fitzroy was out of the room, and return the same way?’

‘But we’d have seen them,’ objected the Admiral.

‘Not if you had your backs turned, walking the other way.’

‘Fitzroy was only out of the room a few minutes, the time it would take us to walk to the end and back.’

‘No matter—it is a possibility—in fact, the only one as things stand.’

‘But there was no one in the drawing-room when we went out,’ said the Admiral.

‘They may have come there afterwards.’

‘You mean,’ said Lord Alloway slowly, ‘that when Fitzroy heard the maid scream and went out, someone was already concealed in the drawing-room, and that they darted in and out through the windows, and only left the drawing-room when Fitzroy had returned to this room?’

‘The methodical mind again,’ said Poirot, bowing.

‘You express the matter perfectly.’

‘One of the servants, perhaps?’

‘Or a guest. It was Mrs Conrad’s maid who screamed. What exactly can you tell me of Mrs Conrad?’

Lord Alloway considered for a minute.

‘I told you that she is a lady well known in society. That is true in the sense that she gives large parties, and goes everywhere. But very little is known as to where she really comes from, and what her past life has been. She is a lady who frequents diplomatic and Foreign Office circles as much as possible. The Secret Service is inclined to ask—why?’

‘I see,’ said Poirot. ‘And she was asked here this week-end—’

‘So that—shall we say?—we might observe her at close quarters.’

‘*Parfaitement!* It is possible that she has turned the tables on you rather neatly.’

Lord Alloway looked discomfited, and Poirot continued: ‘Tell me, milor’, was any reference made in her hearing to the subjects you and the Admiral were going to discuss together?’

‘Yes,’ admitted the other. ‘Sir Harry said: “And now for our submarine! To work!” or something of that sort. The others had left the room, but she had come back for a book.’

‘I see,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘Milor’, it is very late—but this is an urgent affair. I would like to question the members of this house-party at once if it is possible.’

‘It can be managed, of course,’ said Lord Alloway. ‘The awkward thing is, we don’t want to let it get about more than can be helped. Of course, Lady Juliet Weardale and young Leonard are all right—but Mrs Conrad, if she is not guilty, is rather a different proposition. Perhaps you could just state that an important paper is missing, without specifying what it is, or going into any of the circumstances of the disappearance?’

‘Exactly what I was about to propose myself,’ said Poirot, beaming. ‘In fact, in all three cases. Monsieur the Admiral will pardon me, but even the best of wives—’

‘No offence,’ said Sir Harry. ‘All women talk, bless ’em! I wish Juliet would talk a little more and play bridge a little less. But women are like that nowadays, never happy unless they’re dancing or gambling. I’ll get Juliet and Leonard up, shall I, Alloway?’

‘Thank you. I’ll call the French maid. M. Poirot will want to see her, and she can rouse her mistress. I’ll attend to it now. In the meantime, I’ll send Fitzroy along.’

## II

Mr Fitzroy was a pale, thin young man with pince-nez and a frigid expression. His statement was practically word for word what Lord Alloway had already told us.

‘What is your own theory, Mr Fitzroy?’

Mr Fitzroy shrugged his shoulders.

‘Undoubtedly someone who knew the hang of things was waiting his chance outside. He could see what went on through the window, and he slipped in when I left the room. It’s a pity Lord Alloway didn’t give chase then and there when he saw the fellow leave.’

Poirot did not undeceive him. Instead he asked: ‘Do you believe the story of the French maid—that she had seen a ghost?’

‘Well, hardly, M. Poirot!’

‘I mean—that she really thought so?’

‘Oh, as to that, I can’t say. She certainly seemed rather upset. She had her hands to her head.’

‘Aha!’ cried Poirot with the air of one who has made a discovery. ‘Is that so indeed—and she was without doubt a pretty girl?’

‘I didn’t notice particularly,’ said Mr Fitzroy in a repressive voice.

‘You did not see her mistress, I suppose?’

‘As a matter of fact, I did. She was in the gallery at the top of the steps and was calling her—“Léonie!” Then she saw me—and of course retired.’

‘Upstairs,’ said Poirot, frowning.

‘Of course, I realize that all this is very unpleasant for me—or rather would have been, if Lord Alloway had not chanced to see the man actually leaving. In any case, I should be glad if you would make a point of searching my room—and myself.’

‘You really wish that?’

‘Certainly I do.’

What Poirot would have replied I do not know, but at that moment Lord Alloway reappeared and informed us that the two ladies and Mr Leonard Weardale were in the drawing-room.

The women were in becoming negligees. Mrs Conrad was a beautiful woman of thirty-five, with golden hair and a slight tendency to *embonpoint*. Lady Juliet Weardale must have been forty, tall and dark, very thin, still beautiful, with exquisite hands and feet, and a restless, haggard manner. Her son was rather an effeminate-looking young man, as great a contrast to his bluff, hearty father as could well be imagined.

Poirot gave forth the little rigmarole we had agreed upon, and then explained that he was anxious to know if anyone had heard or seen anything that night which might assist us.

Turning to Mrs Conrad first, he asked her if she would be so kind as to inform him exactly what her movements had been.

‘Let me see...I went upstairs. I rang for my maid. Then, as she did not put in an appearance, I came out and called her. I could hear her talking on the stairs. After she had brushed my hair, I sent her away—she was in a very curious nervous state. I read awhile and then went to bed.’

‘And you, Lady Juliet?’

‘I went straight upstairs and to bed. I was very tired.’

‘What about your book, dear?’ asked Mrs Conrad with a sweet smile.

‘My book?’ Lady Juliet flushed.

‘Yes, you know, when I sent Léonie away, you were coming up the stairs. You had been down to the drawing-room for a book, you said.’

‘Oh yes, I did go down. I—I forgot.’

Lady Juliet clasped her hands nervously together.

‘Did you hear Mrs Conrad’s maid scream, milady?’

‘No—no, I didn’t.’

‘How curious—because you must have been in the drawing-room at the time.’

‘I heard nothing,’ said Lady Juliet in a firmer voice.

Poirot turned to young Leonard.

‘Monsieur?’

‘Nothing doing. I went straight upstairs and turned in.’

Poirot stroked his chin.

‘Alas, I fear there is nothing to help me here. Mesdames and monsieur, I regret—I regret infinitely to have deranged you from your slumbers for so little. Accept my apologies, I pray of you.’

Gesticulating and apologizing, he marshalled them out. He returned with the French maid, a pretty, impudent-looking girl. Alloway and Weardale had gone out with the ladies.

‘Now, mademoiselle,’ said Poirot in a brisk tone, ‘let us have the truth. Recount to me no histories. Why did you scream on the stairs?’

‘Ah, monsieur, I saw a tall figure—all in white—’

Poirot arrested her with an energetic shake of his forefinger.

‘Did I not say, recount to me no histories? I will make a guess. He kissed you, did he not? M. Leonard Weardale, I mean?’

‘*Eh bien, monsieur*, and after all, what is a kiss?’

‘Under the circumstances, it is most natural,’ replied Poirot gallantly. ‘I myself, or Hastings here—but tell me just what occurred.’

‘He came up behind me, and caught me. I was startled, and I screamed. If I had known, I would not have screamed—but he came upon me like a cat. Then came *M. le secrétaire*. M. Leonard flew up the stairs. And what could I say? Especially to a *jeune homme comme ça—tellement comme il faut*? *Ma foi*, I invent a ghost.’

‘And all is explained,’ cried Poirot genially. ‘You then mounted to the chamber of Madame your mistress. Which is her room, by the way?’

‘It is at the end, monsieur. That way.’

‘Directly over the study, then. *Bien*, mademoiselle, I will detain you no longer. And *la prochaine fois*, do not scream.’

Handing her out, he came back to me with a smile.

‘An interesting case, is it not, Hastings? I begin to have a few little ideas. *Et vous?*’

‘What was Leonard Weardale doing on the stairs? I don’t like that young man, Poirot. He’s a thorough young rake, I should say.’

‘I agree with you, *mon ami*.’

‘Fitzroy seems an honest fellow.’

‘Lord Alloway is certainly insistent on that point.’

‘And yet there is something in his manner—’

‘That is almost too good to be true? I felt it myself. On the other hand, our friend Mrs Conrad is certainly no good at all.’

‘And her room is over the study,’ I said musingly, and keeping a sharp eye on Poirot.

He shook his head with a slight smile.

‘No, *mon ami*, I cannot bring myself seriously to believe that that immaculate lady swarmed down the chimney, or let herself down from the balcony.’

As he spoke, the door opened, and to my great surprise, Lady Juliet Weardale flitted in.

‘M. Poirot,’ she said somewhat breathlessly, ‘Can I speak to you alone?’

‘Milady, Captain Hastings is as my other self. You can speak before him as though he were a thing of no account, not there at all. Be seated, I pray you.’

She sat down, still keeping her eyes fixed on Poirot.

‘What I have to say is—rather difficult. You are in charge of this case. If the—papers were to be returned, would that end the matter? I mean, could it be done without questions being asked?’

Poirot stared hard at her.

‘Let me understand you, madame. They are to be placed in my hand—is that right? And I am to return them to Lord Alloway on the condition that he asks no questions as to where I got them?’

She bowed her head. ‘That is what I mean. But I must be sure there will be no—publicity.’

‘I do not think Lord Alloway is particularly anxious for publicity,’ said Poirot grimly.

‘You accept then?’ she cried eagerly in response.

‘A little moment, milady. It depends on how soon you can place those papers in my hands.’

‘Almost immediately.’

Poirot glanced up at the clock.

‘How soon, exactly?’

‘Say—ten minutes,’ she whispered.

‘I accept, milady.’

She hurried from the room. I pursed my mouth up for a whistle.

‘Can you sum up the situation for me, Hastings?’

‘Bridge,’ I replied succinctly.

‘Ah, you remember the careless words of Monsieur the Admiral! What a memory! I felicitate you, Hastings.’

We said no more, for Lord Alloway came in, and looked inquiringly at Poirot.

‘Have you any further ideas, M. Poirot? I am afraid the answers to your questions have been rather disappointing.’

‘Not at all, milor’. They have been quite sufficiently illuminating. It will be unnecessary for me to stay here any longer, and so, with your permission, I will return at once to London.’

Lord Alloway seemed dumbfounded.

‘But—but what have you discovered? Do you know who took the plans?’

‘Yes, milor’, I do. Tell me—in the case of the papers being returned to you anonymously, you would prosecute no further inquiry?’

Lord Alloway stared at him.

‘Do you mean on payment of a sum of money?’

‘No, milor’, returned unconditionally.’

‘Of course, the recovery of the plans is the great thing,’ said Lord Alloway slowly. He looked puzzled and uncomprehending.

‘Then I should seriously recommend you to adopt that course. Only you, the Admiral and your secretary know of the loss. Only they need know of the restitution. And you may count on me to support you in every way—lay the mystery on my shoulders. You asked me to restore the papers—I have done so. You know no more.’ He rose and held out his hand. ‘Milor’, I am glad to have met you. I have faith in you—and your devotion to England. You will guide her destinies with a strong, sure hand.’

‘M. Poirot—I swear to you that I will do my best. It may be a fault, or it may be a virtue—but I believe in myself.’

‘So does every great man. Me, I am the same!’ said Poirot grandiloquently.

### III

The car came round to the door in a few minutes, and Lord Alloway bade us farewell on the steps with renewed cordiality.

‘That is a great man, Hastings,’ said Poirot as we drove off. ‘He has brains, resource, power. He is the strong man that England needs to guide her through these difficult days of reconstruction.’

‘I’m quite ready to agree with all you say, Poirot—but what about Lady Juliet? Is she to return the papers straight to Alloway? What will she think when she finds you have gone off without a word?’

‘Hastings, I will ask you a little question. Why, when she was talking with me, did she not hand me the plans then and there?’

‘She hadn’t got them with her.’

‘Perfectly. How long would it take her to fetch them from her room? Or from any hiding-place in the house? You need not answer. I will tell you. Probably about two minutes and a half! Yet she asks for ten minutes. Why? Clearly she has to obtain them from some other person, and to reason or argue with that person before they give them up. Now, what person could that be? Not Mrs Conrad, clearly, but a member of her own family, her husband or son. Which is it likely to be? Leonard Weardale said he went straight to bed. We know that to be untrue. Supposing his mother went to his room and found it empty; supposing she came down filled with a nameless dread—he is no beauty that son of hers! She does not find him, but later she hears him deny that he ever left his room. She leaps to the conclusion that he is the thief. Hence her interview with me.

‘But, *mon ami*, we know something that Lady Juliet does not. We know that her son could not have been in the study, because he was on the stairs, making love to the pretty French maid. Although she does not know it, Leonard Weardale has an alibi.’

‘Well, then, who did steal the papers? We seem to have eliminated everybody—Lady Juliet, her son, Mrs Conrad, the French maid—’

‘Exactly. Use your little grey cells, my friend. The solution stares you in the face.’

I shook my head blankly.

‘But yes! If you would only persevere! See, then, Fitzroy goes out of the study; he leaves the papers on the desk. A few minutes later Lord Alloway enters the room, goes to the desk, and the papers are gone. Only two things are possible: either Fitzroy did *not* leave the papers on the desk, but put



them in his pocket—and that is not reasonable, because, as Alloway pointed out, he could have taken a tracing at his own convenience any time—or else the papers were still on the desk when Lord Alloway went to it—in which case they went into his pocket.’

‘Lord Alloway the thief,’ I said, dumbfounded. ‘But why? Why?’

‘Did you not tell me of some scandal in the past? He was exonerated, you said. But suppose, after all, it had been true? In English public life there must be no scandal. If this were raked up and proved against him now—goodbye to his political career. We will suppose that he was being blackmailed, and the price asked was the submarine plans.’

‘But the man’s a black traitor!’ I cried.

‘Oh no, he is not. He is clever and resourceful. Supposing, my friend, that he copied those plans, making—for he is a clever engineer—a slight alteration in each part which will render them quite impracticable. He hands the faked plans to the enemy’s agent—Mrs Conrad, I fancy; but in order that no suspicion of their genuineness may arise, the plans must seem to be stolen. He does his best to throw no suspicion on anyone in the house, by pretending to see a man leaving the window. But there he ran up against the obstinacy of the Admiral. So his next anxiety is that no suspicion shall fall on Fitzroy.’

‘This is all guesswork on your part, Poirot,’ I objected.

‘It is psychology, *mon ami*. A man who had handed over the real plans would not be overscrupulous as to who was likely to fall under suspicion. And why was he so anxious that no details of the robbery should be given to Mrs Conrad? Because he had handed over the faked plans earlier in the evening, and did not want her to know that the theft could only have taken place later.’

‘I wonder if you are right,’ I said.

‘Of course I am right. I spoke to Alloway as one great man to another—and he understood perfectly. You will see.’

## IV

One thing is quite certain. On the day when Lord Alloway became Prime Minister, a cheque and a signed photograph arrived; on the photograph were the words: ‘*To my discreet friend, Hercule Poirot—from Alloway.*’

I believe that the Z type of submarine is causing great exultation in naval circles. They say it will revolutionize modern naval warfare. I have heard that a certain foreign power essayed to construct something of the same kind and the result was a dismal failure. But I still consider that Poirot was guessing. He will do it once too often one of these days.

## About the Author

**AGATHA CHRISTIE** is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

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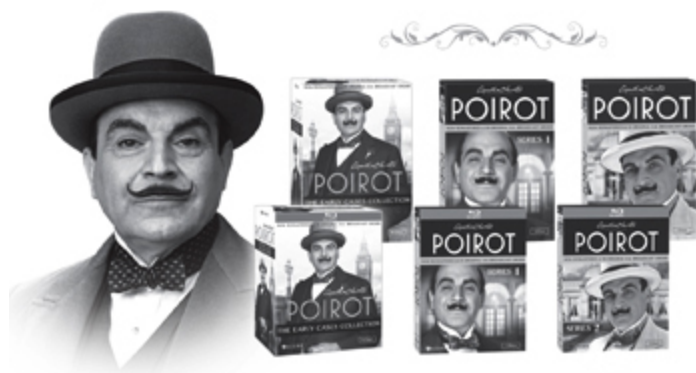
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